[134 cont.]

773 the Miao, and this mythology is therefore the oldest and the most important.

As far as the present writer is aware, the ancestral myths of the different Miao tribes vary slightly, but that of the Sheng Miao is especially interesting. Disregarding the irrationality of these strange events, we have to recognize the fact that with the simple, ignorant people mythology is their living history. This kind of myth came from an unknown period in ancient times, that is, the mythical period. If we ask the Sheng Miao about their myth, they would say that they "do not understand" or that "it was handed down from generation to generation by their ancestors since the remotest times." They have long since forgotten [135] its origin. Some of the Sheng Miao are specially 773 entrusted with the duty of preserving and passing on such tales, 888 and they are generally well-known leaders or aged people with good memories. Young men and women know a little about these stories, but cannot tell them entirely. These mythical tales are not told for recreation, as ordinary stories and as a rule they are not commonly heard. We know that with the primitive people experience is very important. The young people usually listen to the words and warnings of the aged, who become automatically their guardians and leaders. With the Sheng Miao it is the same. The old people are the custodians of all their knowledge and wisdom. The fact that they can recount their ancestral myths entitles them to special respect. The telling of myths is a special occasion, from which outsiders are not often excluded. If we compel them to tell the stories, they would find excuses or else would not do a thorough job for fear that they may be ridiculed.

In every Sheng Miao village there is a set of rules and 627 regulations which are voluntarily observed. In case of violation 773 the offense is quickly adjudged by the public and an elder is invited to execute the punishment. Before it is carried out, however, he would tell the accused in a solemn manner the myths of their ancestors. Also in the case of a serious dispute the elder would summon both parties together, and first tell them the story of their ancestors before settling the dispute.

Akha A04
Miao AE5

/115 cont./

the expenses of a feast in which the whole village participates.

A 586 837

h) Old Age and Death

A M 888 [590]

Among both the Akha and the Meau the families regard it as their highest duty to provide well for the aged and to treat them very well. Thus old people have a pleasant old age within the community of the large /extended/ family to which they belong and which provides for them. Even old people who no longer have their own sib to care for them do not have to worry because, as was described, they are received into another sib (see the chapter "Social Organization," the section on "Age Classes, Secret Societies, Rank Organization").

A M 763 203 [202]

Among both tribes a person's death is quickly made known by means of gong beats and messengers. Hardly a few minutes pass, and the village community is informed. The members of the family, friends, and relatives who live in other villages are also summoned by messengers.

A M 764

In the meantime the corpse is washed, wrapped in new clothes, and, among the Meau, laid out without ornaments on a mat in front of the altar (see the chapter, "Religion and Magic," the section on "Cult and Taboo"). Later the corpse is placed in a shallow basket. Two bamboo sticks are stretched crosswise over this basket, the turban of the deceased is wound on them, and the clothes of the dead are placed on top. Food-

A M [782] [775]

stuffs, expecially rice cakes, are placed on the rice basket as an offering for the soul (see the chapter, "Religion and Magic," the section on "Ideas about Death and the Soul").

M 764 775

Marabail (1) reports a strange custom of the Meau of

1. Page 461.

Indochina. If a person has died, some money is placed in his mouth and all the buttons are cut from the clothing of the deceased, so that the soul may vanish more quickly. /116/ A piece of red cloth is placed upon the lower portion of the face. Then the gong-beating begins in order to ward off the evil

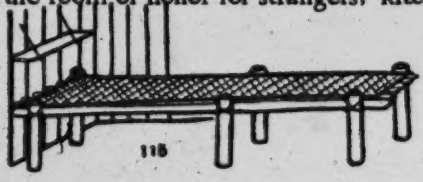
M [789]

/299 cont./

342 513 [354 888] partitioning. The hearth is in the middle of the room opposite a sleeping place which is reserved for the old people. The younger men, women and children sleep anywhere on the bare floor or on an underlayer of straw."

/300/ Only in the "most complete type" of Meau house could the author cited find a tripartite division of the rooms into "the room of honor for strangers, kitchen, and private

[352]



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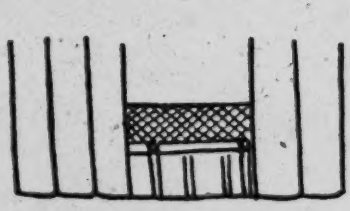

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Fig. 115. Bed of the Meau. About 1/38 nat. size.

Fig. 116. Entrance to the sleeping room of the Meau. About 1/50 nat. size.

rooms," the latter probably referring to the sleeping rooms. /Fig. 117 appears here./

354 252 Every house of the Meau has a hearth for cooking and an open fireplace. The hearth for cooking (Fig. 117) is square and made of mud. The wood fire is maintained under the immovable hearth-plate, in which a depression is made for the cooking pots. If the family is very large, there may be two hearths (Fig. 118).